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Moving 100,000 E-Mails a Day **Andrews Kurth mounts a strong defense** **to help avoid e-mail outages**

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October 8, 2004 - Like other large law firms, Houston-based Andrews Kurth has seen its e-mail volume increase dramatically over the past few years. In fact, in the five years in which I have overseen information technology as the firm's chief information officer, I have witnessed the daily e-mail traffic grow from approximately 10,000 messages a week to more than 100,000 a day. E-mail has rapidly become an indispensable distribution system for our 400-plus attorney firm. As e-mail has increasingly become a lifeline for improving productivity, communications, and efficiency throughout our organization, it has fallen on my shoulders and those of our IT team to ensure that the system not fail—that e-mail continue to flow between our attorneys and clients, in our eight domestic and international offices.

The IT team took a multi-tiered approach to building a secure system for the Microsoft Exchange 2000 e-mail environment the firm uses. First, we examined the more traditional methods of e-mail backup by building a redundant onsite e-mail server in Houston and ensuring that each office's e-mail is backed up.

We also added a storage network with additional backups, and as additional security, installed three tape backups. These initial steps put us in a strong position to glide unharmed through various e-mail failures caused by hardware issues, bad disk drives, or server problems, but they did not completely protect the firm's system from all potential e-mail outage threats. For example, with the e-mail backups onsite and tied directly into the Exchange server, we knew we were vulnerable to viruses that would likely copy themselves directly to—and thus corrupt—the backup servers. Also, in cases of natural or manmade disasters, such as hurricanes or major power outages, having the backup systems onsite with the primary e-mail system meant both were equally vulnerable.

Selecting a Hosted E-Mail Backup Application

With that in mind, our IT team began researching options for a cost-effective backup e-mail system that would reside outside the firm at a trusted facility. In an outage, the offsite backup would be available for instantaneous failover; that is, the system would automatically take over for the primary system seamlessly. Additionally, we required a system that would be resistant to the viruses and worms that often target the Windows platform. We needed a technology that would be easy to deploy and maintain, as with 30 staffers, our IT department is fairly lean and not able to devote extensive resources to the threat of an outage.

We examined a number of high-end systems that offered extensive services and provided remote hosting at disaster recovery class facilities, with redundant power systems and connections to the Internet. Most of these options were prohibitively expensive—as much as, if not more than, the cost of the primary e-mail system.

More importantly, most of the applications would require a lengthy implementation time, in some instances as long as six months, with planning, design, testing, and maintenance by

our IT staff. However, Austin-based MessageOne met our needs and was within our budget—a tenth the price of high-end systems, or pennies per employee per month. MessageOne's product—Emergency Mail System (EMS)—ensured the uninterrupted flow of e-mail within our firm and between the firm and outside accounts.

The e-mail backup can be activated in less than a minute for any reason. EMS is built on an alternative operating system—an open system that makes it resistant to the viruses, worms, and poison pills that can incapacitate typical messaging infrastructures, particularly Microsoft Exchange. Microsoft is a favorite target among hackers and virus writers, who focus some 95 percent of their efforts on Microsoft products. More importantly, we saw great value in a built-in emergency notification system that allows our management team to communicate with employees during a disaster using several methods (SMS, RIM, pager, personal e-mail, cell phones, etc.).

E-Mail Backup Activated

After a quick and easy deployment of less than 24 hours in early 2003, the e-mail backup system was up and running at all eight Andrews Kurth offices. Unlike higher-end systems, there was no hardware to deploy and very little software to install. In fact, a MessageOne technician installed the product over the phone. No onsite visit was required for installation.

Our pre-planning was good news for our staff, as after only a few months a major hardware upgrade resulted in an e-mail outage for 500 users in one location. Because we had put diligent backup procedures in place for a situation such as this, we knew we could recover all e-mail history. However, this process would depend on several factors. Did we have the personnel and equipment available, including sufficient tape drives? Was the data store corrupted or clean? Moreover, we faced the immediate issue of not having e-mail service available for our attorneys and support staff right in the middle of a typically busy workday.

This e-mail downtime could have potentially cost Andrews Kurth a tremendous loss in productivity for our lawyers and staff, who would have been unable to send or receive critical business information. Additionally, the reputation of the firm was on the line, as our clients depend on us for their significant business issues; our downtime quickly could become their business downtime.

We made the decision to activate our backup e-mail system for affected staff by calling the round-the-clock MessageOne network operation center shortly after determining that our e-mail system was seriously affected. Within seconds, e-mail spooled by MessageOne began flowing into our user mailboxes and was easily accessible through a Web browser. Staff were brought online simultaneously and were able to send and receive e-mails. When the upgrade was in place, I arranged the switch from MessageOne back to our primary server. The transition was smooth; we initiated a recovery application, prioritized the restoration order of e-mails and users, and hit the “go” button. All e-mail traffic during the activation was captured and restored to our messaging system within three or four hours.

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